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Regenerative & Cellular Sciences

An Interactive Workshop

FOETAL STEM CELLS: ETHICS & ISSUES

ETHICAL & SOCIAL ISSUES

The use of foetuses to derive tissue for research raises many issues:

- the morality and legality of abortion;
- the best way to value and show respect to aborted foetuses;
- the difficulty of obtaining appropriate consent and protecting women;
- the need to identify and support only important and justifiable research objectives.

In Argentina, abortion is illegal, but pre-natal genetic diagnosis is not, and abortions are, in any event, regularly carried out.

CONSENT & PROTECTION OF WOMAN

Women are asked to donate their foetuses for research after the decision to abort has been made, and the decision to do so (or not) must not alter the treatment they receive. Securing aborted foetuses for research can put medical staff in a difficult position at a time when patients (women) are particularly vulnerable and in need of support and third party advocacy. Not only do they need protection from coercion, but they must also get the compassionate attention their situation deserves.

'[N]o woman undergoes a termination lightly. No. You have to be incredibly careful how you go about the whole process of informed consent.'

[UK Interfaith Group]

'I am a patient's advocate and ... if I don't feel it is appropriate for them to take part, then I feel it is my job to ... block it in that respect rather than try to persuade people to take part.' *[UK Nurse]*

However, some women who undergo abortions feel that donating their foetuses for stem cell research is good: 'What comes out again and again and again is that it gives them a positive.' *[UK Nurse]*

Ultimately, the consent process must be properly timed and must be robust and well documented so researchers downstream can be satisfied that decisions were come to independently.

USING FOETUSES: OPINIONS IN THE UK

People's lived experiences shape their views about stem cell research. Some base their views on their experience as mothers, or as sufferers of infertility, or as sufferers of other conditions, or as scientists:

A foetus is too precious to use for research: '...[P]eople just don't accept or realise how valuable it is until they ... are in a position where they can't have it. I think it is taken too lightly. It is far too easy for somebody to say, 'Oh God, I am pregnant, I will need to go and get an abortion'.'

[UK Infertility Interest Group]

Using a foetus for research prevents closure for the woman: 'I would have thought that if somebody is having a termination they want exactly that ... so I would not have thought that they want the foetus they have just got rid of to be used in any way.'

[UK Woman]

It is valuable to reuse a foetus that has been discarded: 'It is recycling ... something that is going to be thrown away in any case. ... It is just no good to anybody. If scientists are going to get any good out of it [then use it].'

[UK Older Person's Group]

Recycling for the enhancement of knowledge: 'There is always that yuck factor which gives you ... sympathy with some of the public objections ... because you are dealing with human life. But the problem is that it has been discarded and will be thrown away so you have to think of this more as a post mortem; trying to get something good out of this ... '

[UK Stem Cell Scientist]

All avenues should be explored for cures, even if some people consider them troubling: 'There [are] lots of people ... with lots of illnesses and conditions who may well benefit from stem cell research. [T]o have someone who just says, 'No, this is wrong because you are going to use foetal tissue', just because that is the point of view they hold; I don't know if that is even a valid argument.'

[UK Spinal Injury Group]



Source: S. Harmon

MEDICAL RESEARCH v. COSMETIC RESEARCH

Many people support utilising all sources of human tissue for medical research directed at helping people in need, but they do not support the same openness for cosmetics. Unfortunately, the line between medical and cosmetic research is hard to draw. Many processes with medical applications, such as skin growth and grafting for burn victims have cosmetic utility as well.